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HOUSE BILL 2193

By Bunch

AN ACT to name the bridge across the Hiwassee River on U.S. 11 (SR 2) the "Captain James S. Varnell, Jr. Bridge".

WHEREAS, it is fitting that the elected representatives of the State of Tennessee should name certain highways and bridges to honor those brave members of the armed forces of the United States who have served heroically in defense of this nation in time of war; and

WHEREAS, Captain James Sullins Varnell, Jr. of Charleston, Tennessee, is one such courageous warrior who performed heroically as a combat fighter pilot in the U. S. Army Air Corps during World War II; and

WHEREAS, James Varnell grew up in a small house on U.S. 11 just north of the current Charleston school building with sisters Betty and Minnie Ellen; his parents were Bess Varnell and World War I veteran James Varnell, Sr.; and

WHEREAS, after entering service, James Varnell graduated from flying school in Marianna, Florida, and was assigned to fly the P-51 Mustang from newly liberated North Africa and later from southern France; the Mustangs were converted to bomber escorts for long range missions over southern Germany, Austria, Romania and the Balkans; and

WHEREAS, Captain Varnell's extraordinary eyesight made him an outstanding pilot and marksman who was able to spot enemy aircraft before others could do so; on May 30, 1944 he scored his first double kill followed by a second over Romania the following day. On June 16, 1944, the Second Squadron encountered more than 50 enemy fighters over Czechoslovakia and Captain Varnell scored his third double of the day before his guns jammed. Even then he employed his fighter to keep enemy fighters off a crippled U.S. bomber; and

WHEREAS, some of Captain Varnell's most important exploits occurred during raids on the Nazi controlled oilfields in Ploesti, Romania, where the German Luftwaffe, desperate to protect that essential resource, sent up fierce resistance to the allied sorties; on July 9, 1944, he dived on a large formation of enemy fighters that were about to attack the allied bombers and shot down a Messerschmitt 109, pursued another Messerschmitt through flak and falling bombs and shot it down, then turned sharply out of the stream of falling bombs and picked off his third Messerschmitt; and

WHEREAS, The July 9 sortie brought Captain Varnell's record to 15, giving him a tie for the leading ace in the European theater; his 17th and final score came on August 4, 1944, returning from a shuttle escort to the USSR; again over Romania he spotted a German JU-52 flying below him, dived to engage the plane and shot it down; and

WHEREAS, the Army Air Corps then transferred Captain Varnell back to the United States for duty as a flight instructor; tragically, he died in a training session on August 9, 1945, just a month before V-E Day, near Pinellas, Florida; and

WHEREAS, during his relatively short combat career, this "Ace Among Aces" who served in the 12th Air Force in Southern France from September 1943 - April 1944 and in the 15th Air Force from May 1944 - August 1944 flew 120 missions over enemy territory and destroyed 17 enemy aircraft; he was the recipient of the Certificate of Valor - Aerial Combat, a recognition of Courageous Service for Aerial Combat, the Silver Star, a Distinguished Flying

Cross with 2 Oakleaf Clusters, an Air Medal with 15 Oakleaf Clusters, a Unit Citation for Special Achievement, and the European Theater, Africa and Middle Eastern Bronze Star; and

WHEREAS, perhaps because of his untimely death and due to the volume of combat information engulfing the nation as the war came to a close, Captain Varnell's heroic combat record did not receive the level of recognition that it merited; the members of this General Assembly find it appropriate to finally honor this brave Tennessean by naming the bridge across the Hiwassee River of U.S. 11 (SR 2) the "Captain James S. Varnell, Jr. Memorial Bridge"; now, therefore,

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. Notwithstanding any other provision of law to the contrary, the bridge across the Hiwassee River on U.S. 11 (SR 2) near Charleston, Tennessee, is hereby designated as the "Captain James S. Varnell, Jr. Memorial Bridge" to commemorate the heroic actions of Captain Varnell as a combat fighter pilot in the Army Air Corps during World War II.

SECTION 2. The department of transportation is directed to erect suitable signs or affix suitable markers designating such bridge as the "Captain James S. Varnell, Jr. Memorial Bridge".

SECTION 3. The erection of such directional signs shall be within the guidelines prescribed by the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

SECTION 4. This act shall become operative only if the federal highway administrator advises the commissioner of transportation in writing that the provisions of this act shall not render Tennessee in violation of federal laws and regulations and subject to penalties prescribed therein.

SECTION 5.

(1) This act shall become operative only if Bradley County, Tennessee, either remits the estimated cost of the erection of such signs to the department of transportation within one (1) year of the effective date of this act or manufactures such

signs in accordance with the provisions of subdivision two (2). Bradley County shall make such payments prior to any expenditure by the state for manufacture or installation of such signs. The department shall return any unused portion of the estimated cost to Bradley County within thirty (30) days of the erection of such signs. If the actual cost exceeds the estimated cost, Bradley County shall remit an amount equal to the difference in such costs to the department within thirty (30) days of receiving an itemized invoice of the actual cost from the department.

(2) Bradley County may manufacture and erect such signs provided that such signs are manufactured and erected pursuant to state and federal guidelines and approved by the department.

SECTION 6. This act shall take effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.